

# Albert Einstein in Barcelona: "My name is Albert Einstein and I am also revolutionary, an anti-authoritarian"



In February 1923, Albert Einstein visited Barcelona at the invitation of the Mancomunitat (the forerunner of the Generalitat, the Catalan government, which was reestablished in 1932) to give a series of sponsored lectures explaining his theory of relativity. On arrival he insisted on meeting with — and giving talks to — members of the CNT, the anarcho-syndicalist labour union. The following account of Einstein's Barcelona visit is excerpted from '¡Pistoleros! 3: 1920-24. The Chronicles of Farquhar McHarg':

'I shared a rented room above a bar in the Carrer Cadena with two Soli editors, Liberto Callejas and Irenofilo Diaro. The bar was leased to a chef by the name of Narciso, a compañero who had taken it on after the collapse of the big waiters' strike in 1919. We ate there as well — three times a day, our meals being included in the rent — and slept on foldaway camp beds during the day.

'I was working for an engineering firm in Barceloneta as a toolmaker, but most evenings I spent translating and writing for Solidaridad Obrera's international news section. Soli's editorial offices had moved to no. 58 Conde del Asalto (now the Nou de la Rambla), in the heart of the Fifth District, which for some reason was now referred to in the press as China Town, the barri Xino. I was also helping out at Crisol! but that was much less demanding work.

'It was at Soli's office in Asalto that I met, of all people, Albert Einstein, the great theoretical physicist who was visiting Barcelona on a lecture tour sponsored by Esteve Terradas, an engineer, CNT sympathiser and a prominent Gran Oriente freemason. Terradas, an enthusiastic supporter of the rationalist schools, had brought Einstein from Berlin to give a series of lectures on his recently published and much talked about theory of relativity.

'Einstein arrived with his wife, Elsa, in late February, and because he wasn't such a celebrity in those days, not many people knew he was in town until the posters appeared announcing his lectures at the Syndicalist Athenaeum in the Carrer Mercader and the Sants Rationalist Athenaeum in the Carrer Vallespir.

'The city fathers and 'men of order' were appalled when they learned that the great physicist was hobnobbing with anarchists and cenetistas. That wasn't all. He had booked himself into a dilapidated old pensión, the Grand Hotel of the Four Nations — Le Quatre Nations — at No 35 Las Ramblas, on the corner of Escudellers and the Plaça del Teatro. The city fathers tried to move him to the Ritz, but Einstein would have none of it, insisting that he preferred to remain where he was. When I asked him what was so special about that particular hotel, he said he specifically wanted to stay there, because it was where Michael Bakunin had lodged in 1869, just prior to the Lyons uprising and the Paris Commune. Einstein was an admirer of Bakunin and had specifically asked for the Russian anarchist's old room. I wonder what his wife made of the hotel, or the room; it hadn't changed much in the intervening fifty years — not that his wife's opinions appeared to matter much to him.

'Einstein's first port of call after checking in at the Quatre Nations was to the Soli office where he found me writing my column. In he walked, unexpected and unannounced, asking to speak to Ángel Pestaña. At first I didn't know who he was and assumed, because of his violin case and dishevelled appearance, that he was a street or café musician, a busker. He was in his mid-forties at the time, but even then he had an air of permanent distraction — other-worldliness — about him. He wore a shabby brown woollen suit with a cardigan, a white shirt with a high plastic collar and a red tie topped by a mop of tousled, unruly brown hair that stuck out in all directions making him look as though someone had stuck a live 2,000 volt electrode up his arse. His hair was already greying at the temples and roots — as was his droopy moustache, and his round, cheery face bore an expression of permanent, pleasant surprise; and his eyes shone with mischief and humour.

'Salud!' he said, seizing my hand warmly with both hands. 'Please allow me to introduce myself. My name is Albert Einstein and I, too, am a revolutionary, an anti-authoritarian: I am the original valiant and fearless Swabian. You, the anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists, of the CNT are also valiant Swabians, revolutionaries of the streets; I, however, am a new-generation revolutionary operating in the field of quantum physics and I will disprove the reactionary quantum theorists and carry the banner of the quantum revolution into ever-stranger territory and provide the final triumphant synthesis of unified field theory.'

'I looked at him blankly, dumfounded, and — I'm embarrassed to admit — all I could think of to say to the great man was: 'Really? Fascinating! Would you like some coffee?

'Pestaña wasn't in, so I explained, briefly who I was and what I was doing in Barcelona, and offered to take him to the union offices in the nearby Carrer Nou, where we would probably find him. We hit it off really well and chatted away like old friends as we walked. The reason he wanted to meet Pestaña was because his anarchist friends in Berlin — Rudolf Rocker, Fritz Kater and Augustin Souchy — said he was the best person to explain what was happening in Spain.

'Einstein was a delight to be with — sympathetic and supportive of everything we were doing. We chatted for hours in Pestaña's office before heading off for supper. It was a memorable evening, full of little insights into the physical and metaphysical universe — and the man himself.

'Nice to be somewhere where nobody's bothered about quantum physics' was one of his more memorable comments I remember. He loved his sausages and music, in no particular order of preference, so we chose the restaurant we took him to for its chorizo and resident string quartet, which pleased the 'fearless Swabian' enormously. As he said, 'Fine sausages nourish the body and good music nurtures the imagination.' In fact he was so excited when he saw the restaurant had an orchestra he leaped on to the podium with his violin and pleaded with the musicians to let him join in. What could they say? It didn't take them long to realise their mistake, but everyone — audience and musicians alike — took his contribution to the evening's entertainment uncritically and with good

humour, and gave him a standing ovation at the end, probably to get him off the stage. His playing was appalling, and he seemed totally oblivious to his lack of musical talent. Einstein may have been able to predict the bending of starlight by the warping of space around the sun, but he was shit on the violin.\*

'Einstein was one of these people with a theory and opinion about everything, not just relativity, but he was never boring or pedantic — even about his pacifism. His conversation was riveting, and he bubbled on passionately about his loathing for state power and all forms of regimentation. 'Politics,' he said, 'is for the present, but our equations are for eternity.' The only thing he didn't have a theory about, so far, was what he called *einheitliche Fieldtheorie*, a unified theory about everything — but he was working on it.

'Over dinner he explained how the idea of relativity had come to him. It happened while daydreaming about travelling on a light beam. He described it as one of his 'Aha!' moments, when the 'little grey brain cells' suddenly have a breakthrough. 'Insights explode on you when you least expect them,' he observed, 'when you think the brain has given up on the big problem you are wrestling with and you find yourself distracted and thinking of something completely unrelated.'

'Another of those 'Aha!' moments led him to apply his theory of relativity to gravity. This particular epiphany occurred one day after lunch as he stared absent-mindedly out of the window of the patent office where he worked. Across the road he saw a slater perched precariously on the roof of a tall building. Suddenly, he had a flashforward of the man falling — and while even though it was a sickening thought that made him panic, at the same time he found himself calculating, incongruously, that until the man hit the ground he would be unaware of his own weight. That moment he described as one of 'perfect certainty'; an inspired thought that he regarded as the happiest in his life so far. Everything is relative, I suppose.

'The wider point of the story,' he said, 'was that if you feel you have hit an impasse the best way to think of all problems — be they mathematical, scientific, political, ethical, moral or even domestic — is to walk away from them. When it seems you can achieve nothing more, you should find a way of distracting yourself, maybe by walking the dog if you have one. The answer, my friends,' he concluded triumphantly 'will arrive when you least expect it and you will see the same old thing in a completely new way. Once that happens, you never go back!'